

Back Again, Back Again: Homecoming

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode six:
Homecoming

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

If you asked me about a *rebel camp in a portal realm*, I would have described to you Aslan's How - the way Disney made it, in the movies, all red-and-gold domed tents and mythical creatures, regal and noble. Despite being made up of refugees and half-trained fighters and outcasts, I would have painted the *fretim* camp as a place where all were vivid, well-armored, unquestionable heroes. Armor would be stamped not with Aslan's gentle face but our Rhysean equivalent, flowers and stars and sunlight. Forges would intersperse the edges of the camp to ensure no one was without protection and no one was unable to protect. No one would be hungry. Everyone would be trusting. Everyone would have no doubt that they were doing right, and

everyone would be certain their mission would prove fruitful. You know - *The rebels will succeed, the rebels will make this world whole. Cair Paravel will be restored and Aslan will breathe life back into this place.*

The *fretim* was not made like that. There were no red-and-gold tents or domed roofs - that would have been a waste of fabric and a waste of dye. Tents - because this was a permanent place, tents were abundant, tents were a plea to the fates to *make* them permanent, to stick around - were made of burlap and rough brown canvas. There were no forges, no well-armored soldiers - metal was expensive, metal cost so much money and food was hard enough to have enough of, especially when the few mines in Rhysea were guarded by soldiers and all their residents that would have wanted to help fight back were under a watch akin to a prison camp. Here, food was a luxury, and so new metal was an impossibility.

The people were more than a little haggard. The people looked less than a little noble.

I froze at the edge of the camp, staring through the tents at the path into the clearing. It had rained the night before, and the ground was so well-trodden that the big center clearing was not far off from being a mud pit, sludge threatening to pull off your boots. Callia, unphased, continued on before eventually she realized I wasn't following.

I hadn't meant to freeze. I'd just - I'd been expecting Aslan's How. Sure, they were working against the kings, sure, I'd seen firsthand how underequipped they could be, but -

Callia turned back around to face me, and I could see in her stare that I'd failed another test. *What were you expecting, eligidida? Jewels?*

We both knew that wasn't what I *had* been expecting, but she was daring me to say something, eyes hard, lip just barely starting to curl. *Disgust*, or maybe *embarrassment* marred her face - but not an embarrassment that came from self-consciousness. An embarrassment that came from having to be around me. It was, unfortunately, the expression I'd become most acquainted with on her face.

Part of me wanted to say *a fighting chance*, but that was both unnecessarily cruel and - untrue. It took an enormous amount of strength to organize something like this. It took an enormous amount of strength to stay alive as long as they had.

I didn't take the bait. I simply raised my chin like Cassian taught me and pretended I had never faltered at all.

The stares of the people within the clearing as we made our way to the center varied wildly between curious and caustic. No one tried to hide that they were staring, either. Off on my left, a training circle had paused in their exercises to watch, and I recognized the girl leading the exercise - recognized her,

that is, from one of the raids Cassian and I had gone on. I'd killed another girl on that raid. The dagger I'd taken from her at the end of it - because, of course, the bodies were stripped for weapons to ensure the *fretim* didn't just lose fighters but blades, too, burning away even the magpie instinct of salvaging what was left - wasn't even with me.

It was in Cassian's room. I'd spent that night with Cassian, because I hadn't wanted to be *alone* and he'd been there, at that battle, had known what I'd seen and had seen it, too. Because that raid was one we'd gone on after moonlights and rooftops and *let me tell you everything I know*, and instead of giving Rhia the truth of the battle, of where we'd been going, I'd told her a lie about diplomacy and a dinner at the house of one of the lairds. I'd taken my armor with me. Rhia wasn't a fool. She knew my purpose in that castle. My purpose when I was finally let outside of it.

To inspire fear.

I'd taken the girl's dagger because it was well-made. It likely had been stolen from the palace in the first place, Cassian had told me. The castle was where it belonged. With time, I would have learned to use it.

But that would be another lie I'm telling you. The reason for taking the girl's dagger. The swords went back into circulation

with the soldiers, yes, but the palace guard did not use daggers with any regularity.

It was a trophy. You know this, I know this. Let's not pretend at otherwise. And I hadn't even - remembered it, remembered that I'd taken it, remembered where I'd left it, until I saw her face.

Trophy. What is a trophy if it honors nothing? If the owner forgets its existence?

I'm not sure. But it falls far away from anything that can be misconstrued as *glory*.

I did, in Rhysean, know the word for *killer*. And the friend of the girl I'd killed clearly recognized me, eyes narrowing. I watched her mouth it, the word, *killer*, and watched the way the rest of those crowded around her clutched their weapons or practice poles just a little bit tighter.

Killer. Well - we say *killer*. In English. But in Rhysean, there aren't a myriad of ways to say *killer* like there are in English, a thousand thousand shades of gray. In Rhysean, there are exactly two: defender - *guardare* - and *deskina* - killer. Black and white - two words, each well-honed and finely sharpened, ready to draw blood.

Defender: someone who protects their land or family or friends when they are attacked and invaded. *Defender:* someone who is protecting an ideology or a faraway leader, perceived

threatened. You can kill without being a *killer*. You can kill without it becoming an aspect of *being*. *To kill*: verb, impermanent, an action taken.

Killer: adjective. A condemnation.

In English, the word assigned or hurled or stamped on a file is determined by the perceived worth of the person killed. *Murderer*, of innocents or children or someone defenseless. *Killer*, for the gray area between *accidental death* and *intentional harm*. *Assassin*, when a political figure or celebrity or star, someone with a cult or cult of personality, is killed. *Hero*, when those deciding assign the dead no humanity at all.

In Rhysean, it's not different, I suppose. Just - no shades of gray. You are righteous. Or - you are guilty, a stone added to your soul so it will slam your heart to the floor when it is weighed against a feather.

Deskina, the girl murmured, and the sound carried on the wind. I tensed. Callia's eyes flicked to the girl. I hoped, for a wild moment, that she would reproach the girl. Defend my honor, because I didn't know enough to be able to do it myself.

Callia walked over to the girl and pulled her into an embrace. The girl's sword clattered to the dirt, and she threw her arms around Callia's neck. Callia hugged her tighter. It seemed to last forever, this display of affection. It felt like I shouldn't have been watching. *Haast*, Callia finally said in

place of any reproach for my sake. Not that I'd expected her to, by this point. *Good to see you.*

You survived - something, something I didn't catch, this girl's accent was thick - *kings*.

Sic. Eligidida sians - Callia shot a glance back at me, lip curled, already having sensed how intently I was listening. She switched, then, to that odd slanted-Rhysean that the performers had used. Haast laughed, at whatever she said, but it wasn't a particularly kind laugh.

I know that you're talking about me, I snapped in Rhysean, so tired of language being used as a weapon. *Say it to my face.*

It didn't come out that smoothly, and I sounded foolish. Haast and Callia wore matching expressions of disgust.

I said, Haast purred, stepping around Callia, talking slowly and clearly, *that you are a worthless little* -

Ilyaas, someone gasped behind me, and I spun around to find the voice, not daring to get my hopes up.

Rhia.

She fell from one of the tents, Iolo hot on her heels - she stumbled, and although I darted to catch her, Iolo was there first, blocking my path and giving Rhia her arm to cling to. I didn't care that Iolo didn't want me there. I grabbed her free hand, squeezed it, lifted a hand to cup her chin like she'd done to me a thousand times before.

My thumb caught on the edge of the bandage that covered the place her eye had been. Rhia spooked, jerking her chin out of my hand, and nearly fell again, clinging wildly to my hand and Iolo's arm.

Eligidida - Callia snapped from behind me, and grabbed my shoulder. *Leave her alone.*

No, Rhia said, and shook her head. Her voice was harder than it had been a couple of days ago. Pain ages you, I guess. No, *it's fine.* And then, in English, to me - *I just - don't touch it, okay?*

Of course, I said automatically. I almost, foolishly, said, *I'm glad you're alright,* but caught my tongue at the last moment and froze. It was harder to get out the right words. I wanted her to understand the extent of them, that they stretched beyond this moment and went back, and back, to the moment I said *fretim* in front of Cassian and the moment I accidentally traded her eye for a signal. Because really, the 'accidentally' didn't matter. It had happened, no matter my intention. *I - I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen like this.*

A memory that's seared into my brain: Rhia's lip, for half a second, curled into something like hatred, something like disgust, and she was a stranger to me and I was justifiable enemy. Her grip tightened on my hand, nails digging in. *But it did.*

I started, mouth half-open, starting and just as quickly ending a thousand thousand sentences.

The common tongue, please? Callia said brusquely. *Not all of us are pretty and royal.*

I said I am glad to see her, Rhia said. *And Ilyaas said the same.*

That was enough for me to realize: they didn't know I was the reason she'd lost her eye. I was already on shaky enough ground with the *Fretim*. Even when there was part of her that was unable to forgive me my actions, Rhia still didn't betray me in this strange place.

There was no part of me that deserved her.

Rhia pushed me off of her and back towards Callia and Haast, though neither of them seemed particularly thrilled at that. Haast recoiled, picking her sword back up from the ground. Slowly - for my benefit, slowly - Rhia said, in Rhysean, *find her new clothes. Make her look like one of us.*

She's not, Haast growled.

She is here, no? Not with the false rex et poeta et soldat. Not with Cassian. Do you remember why I escaped?

Iolo raised an eyebrow. *Remember why you were in trouble at all?*

Rhia's jaw set, and I could tell she was fighting the urge to grind her teeth together. Deliberately, she said, *This is*

meaningless without trust. We must work together if we want to have any chance of success.

I realized, as she crossed her arms over her chest, just how much weight Rhia had among these people, for them to hear her out. She was powerful in a quiet way. The kind that, once all she meant was laid out on the table before you, was hard to resist. And she believed in this cause - believed in *me*. What I was capable of.

Even after everything.

I will not - Haast began, voice harsh - and then, something I couldn't understand - *killer*.

That, at least, made it fairly easy to fill in the gaps. I got ready to snarl something terrible back, *Well, I don't want to be seen around the friend of such a terrible fighter, but we all have to do things we don't want*, but Callia didn't give me a chance to lose my temper and make my standing even worse among these people. Bless her.

To Rhia - *Fine. We will find her new clothes*. I did not miss how she neatly stepped around the phrase *we will work together*. Callia was not sold on me, but this was a step.

Please do, Rhia said, and, grabbing Iolo's hand, pulled the other girl back into their tent.

Callia's eyes lingered for a moment at the flaps of the tent, not quite *staring daggers* but something close. She seemed to make a decision. To Haast - *Where is Natolia?*

Haast rolled her eyes and said something I didn't understand, but it was enough for Callia. She gestured impatiently to me - *come, eligidida* - and then we were off, pounding through the camp, and I kept checking back over my shoulder at the tent that held my best friend and someone I might have treated too lightly one too many times, and the clearing, full of people who knew everything I'd done - that was the scariest part of it, that they didn't need to embellish how reprehensible I was, that was the scariest part of it, that I'd become someone that the word *killer*, in Rhysean, could be branded onto, and it twisted my stomach not because it was untrue, but because it was *right*.

This was not the homecoming I'd imagined, back when it was just Rhia and I on the roofs, telling stories and dreaming up new futures. It was closer to the one I deserved.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show,

please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigaillelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.